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Trump promises mass deportations of undocumented people. How would that work?

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - AUGUST 23, 2024 2:17 PM



A person holds a sign that reads "Mass Deportation Now" on the third day of the Republican National Convention at the Fiserv Forum on July 17, 2024 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Leon Neal/Getty Images).

WASHINGTON — "Mass deportation now!" is a catchphrase for the Trump presidential campaign, as the Republican nominee proposes a crackdown on immigration that would oust thousands of undocumented people.

Often citing a deportation operation enacted by former President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s, former President Donald Trump has repeatedly vowed in campaign rallies that he plans to not only go back to the tough immigration policies of his first term in office, but expand them greatly.

"We're going to have the largest deportation," Trump said at a June campaign rally in Racine, Wisconsin. "We have no choice."

The president-elect's plan for mass deportation is a central theme of his campaign.

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“We’re going to have the largest deportation,” Trump said at a June campaign rally in Racine, Wisconsin. “We have no choice.”

The crowd responded with a chant: “Send them back. Send them back. Send them back.”

Mass deportation would be a broad, multipronged effort under Trump’s vision. The plan includes invoking an 18th-century law; reshuffling law enforcement at federal agencies; transferring funds within programs in the Department of Homeland Security; and forcing greater enforcement of immigration laws.

But whether a Trump administration could accomplish a mass deportation is doubtful. Historians, lawyers and immigration and economic experts interviewed by States Newsroom said removal of the more than 11 million undocumented people in the country would require enormous amounts of resources and overcoming legal hurdles. The effects on the U.S. economic and social fabric would be profound, they said.

“I don’t think it will happen,” Donald Kerwin, a senior researcher on migration at the University of Notre Dame, said of mass deportations. “But what it can do is it can make the lives of the undocumented and their families miserable.”

GOP support

Trump repeatedly has pledged mass deportation.

At the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee in July, delegates waved “Mass Deportation Now” signs as Trump said “to keep our families safe, the Republican platform promises to launch the largest deportation operation in the history of our country.”

In a March rally in Dayton, Ohio, Trump said some undocumented immigrants were not “people.”

“I don’t know if you call them people,” Trump said. “In some cases they’re not people, in my opinion, but I’m not allowed to say that because the radical left says that’s a terrible thing to say.”

Trump’s campaign message comes as the Biden administration has dealt with the largest number of migrant encounters at the [southern border in 20 years](#) and immigration [remains a top issue for voters](#).

However, since President Joe Biden signed a recent executive order, [border crossings have fallen to their lowest level since he took office](#).

The GOP and Trump have now set their sights on the Democratic presidential nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris.

House Republicans already [led a resolution disapproving](#) of Harris’ handling of the southern border and labeling her the “Border Czar,” a title she was given by the media. Her campaign has argued she never had such an official title and her involvement with immigration has been focused on root causes of migration in Central and South America, rather than domestic immigration.

Even though Biden is no longer in the race, and has undertaken his own crackdown on immigration, he warned in mid-June, [during an announcement of protections offered for the spouses of long-term undocumented people](#), that Trump would undertake mass deportations.

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“Now he’s proposing to rip spouses and children from their families and homes and communities and place them in detention camps,” Biden said of Trump. “He’s actually saying these things out loud, and it’s outrageous.”

How does the public feel?

Polls have found Americans are split on the idea of mass deportations but Republicans are more supportive.

A recent [CBS News poll](#) that found nearly 6 in 10 voters favor a new government agency that would deport all undocumented immigrants. Of those voters, one-third were Democrats and 9 in 10 were Republicans.

The Trump campaign did not respond to multiple requests from States Newsroom for comment on the specifics of how a second Trump administration would plan to carry out mass deportations.

The massive deportation campaign that Trump often cites in his campaign rallies was conducted under the Eisenhower administration in the summer of 1954, with a pejorative, racist name attached to it.

“Following the Eisenhower model, we will carry out the largest domestic deportation operation in American history,” Trump said at a September rally last year in Ankeny, Iowa.

But what the Trump campaign is proposing is not an Eisenhower-style crackdown, said Michael Clemens, a professor in the Department of Economics at George Mason University.

“That policy was instituted hand-in-hand with a crucial other arm of the policy,” he said – which was that lawful work pathways for Mexicans to the U.S. were nearly tripled at the same time as the mass deportations.

“We’ve heard zero about substantial increases in lawful migration pathways from the people who are now talking about an Eisenhower-style crackdown,” Clemens said. “What they’re proposing is not an Eisenhower-style crackdown – it is something that the Eisenhower administration understood would not work and therefore it did not do.”

Additionally, the Eisenhower program was not as successful as thought.

The Eisenhower administration [claimed that it deported 1 million people](#) back to Mexico, but the real number is a couple hundred thousand, said Eladio Bobadilla, an assistant history professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

“It wasn’t really about getting rid of immigrants in any real sense,” he said. “It was a way to sell to the American public that the problem had been solved.”

While one agency of the Eisenhower administration was deporting Mexicans – and often U.S. citizens of Mexican descent – another agency was sometimes bringing those same workers back in through the so-called Bracero program, which was created through [an executive order by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) in 1942.

States and local governments also worked in tandem with the 1950s deportation operation, something unlikely to happen under a second Trump administration, said David Bier, the director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

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States and local governments also worked in tandem with the 1950s deportation operation, something unlikely to happen under a second Trump administration, said David Bier, the director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

“You also had the cooperation of the employers in those areas, because the Eisenhower administration was totally explicit that all the people that we’re deporting, you’re gonna get workers back legally through the Bracero guest worker program,” said Bier.

Obama deportation

The most recent mass deportation campaign came during the Obama administration, said Clemens, who studies the economic effects of migration.

That was the Secure Communities program, which was a set of agreements between local law enforcement and federal level immigration enforcement officials such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection. Localities shared information about noncitizens who were encountered by local law enforcement, such as at traffic stops.

“Our most recent experience with mass deportation at the federal level, mostly under the Obama administration, directly harmed U.S. workers,” Clemens said.

The program was slowly rolled out, from 2008 to 2014, but over those six years nearly half a million workers were deported.

For every 10 workers who were deported, one U.S. job was eliminated, Clemens said.

“The net effect is that Secure Communities cost jobs for Americans across the country,” he said.

[In a recent paper for the Center for Migration Studies of New York](#), Kerwin and Robert Warren found that mass deportations would financially harm U.S. families, especially the more than 3 million mixed-status families.

“The household income in those households plunges, and drops all of these families, or a high percentage of them, into poverty,” Kerwin said.

Of those mixed-status families, meaning some family members have different citizenship or immigration status, about 6.6 million members are U.S. citizens, said Warren, a senior visiting fellow at the center, a think tank that studies domestic and international migration patterns.

“So you say, ‘We took out one undocumented immigrant,’ but you damaged a family of U.S. citizens,” Warren said.

Expanded executive authority

The early architects of the Trump administration’s immigration policies such as Steven Miller and Ken Cuccinelli have laid out a second term that would expand the use of executive authority to carry out mass deportations and curtail legal immigration.

Such policies include limiting humanitarian visas and parole and moving to end Temporary Protected Status, known as TPS, said ManoLasya Perepa, policy and practice counsel with the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Like the first Trump administration, Perepa anticipates that there will be a slew of lawsuits to file injunctions, such as preventing the ending of TPS.

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The Trump administration dealt with a flurry of lawsuits over an order to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which protects a little over half a million undocumented people brought into the United States as children without authorization.

The Supreme Court eventually blocked it and kept the program, but DACA is still at risk of being deemed unlawful in a separate suit that is [likely to head again to the high court](#).

“I think anybody with a status that keeps getting renewed is really, really at risk,” she said. “All you’re doing is driving people into the shadows.”

With the courts likely to get involved, Trump has said he wants to go back to his policy that expanded expedited removals, which means if an undocumented person is in the country for two years without a court hearing or any type of authorization, they can be deported without a hearing before a judge.

That type of removal is limited to 100 miles from a border zone, but the Trump administration expanded that to the rest of the country.

“The reality is, if the (Trump) administration increases interior enforcement, technically, all of these people could be detained,” Perepa said.

The Migration Policy Institute, a think tank that researches migration, [has estimated](#) that “the expansion of expedited removal to the U.S. interior could apply to as many as 288,000 people.”

Miller, a senior White House adviser during the Trump administration, said on the right-wing podcast “The Charlie Kirk Show” in November 2023 that the U.S. military would need to be involved for those mass deportations to Mexico, which is “why Trump has talked about invoking the Alien Enemies Act.”

“Because of the logistical challenges involved in removing...you would need to build an extremely large holding area for illegal immigrants that at any given points in time, you know, could hold upwards of 50, 60, 70,000 illegal aliens while you are waiting to send them someplace, somewhere that would be willing to accept them,” Miller said.

[The Alien and Sedition Act, an 18th-century wartime law](#), allows the executive branch to deport any noncitizen from a country that the U.S. is at war with and deport any noncitizen deemed dangerous.

The law can also be used for extraordinary measures that are not deportation, including the last time it was invoked after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. [It led to the internment camps](#) of more than 120,000 people of Japanese descent, more than half of whom were U.S. citizens, as well as German and Italian nationals, during World War II.

Trump has vowed to use a title within the Alien and Sedition Acts to target drug dealers, gang members and cartel members.

“I will invoke the Alien Enemy Act, to remove all known or suspected gang members from the United States ending the scourge of illegal alien gang violence once and for all,” Trump said at a campaign stop in Reno, Nevada.

Cuccinelli, a former attorney general of Virginia and acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services during the Trump administration, wrote the policy section for the Department of Homeland Security for [the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025](#) – a conservative “battle plan” for the next Republican president.

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In that section, he laid out recommendations for an incoming Republican administration to curtail the use of temporary work visas for workers in agriculture, construction and hospitality; prevent U.S. citizens from qualifying for federal housing subsidies if they live with someone who is a noncitizen; and require driver's license information to be shared with federal authorities; among other policies.

The Heritage Foundation did not respond to a request for comment.

Punishing states

In a lengthy interview Trump conducted [with Time magazine](#), he said he would withhold federal funding from states and local governments that don't cooperate in deportation proceedings.

That could violate the 10th Amendment in the Constitution, said Mae Ngai, a historian and Asian American studies professor at Columbia University.

“States and municipalities cannot be coerced into enforcing federal laws,” she said, adding that immigration law is a federal matter. “You cannot force the police department or sheriffs ... to pick up immigrants.”

State and local cooperation in detaining immigrants could be a challenge, said Julia Gelatt, associate director of the U.S. Immigration Policy Program at the Migration Policy Institute.

Legal challenges make it costly for local law enforcement to detain people solely to wait for immigration proceedings, and many local governments have decided not to hold people beyond their criminal detentions.

Funding issues

Deploying the military for immigration enforcement and constructing detention camps would also come with a large price tag.

Those large expenses would have to be approved by Congress, which may not be a willing partner.

There are ways to get around the legislative branch, such as reshuffling money within the Department of Homeland Security, but they come with downsides, Bier of the Cato Institute said.

“That's politically risky because if there's any kind of natural disaster, and you're using money to deport people that can have some big blowbacks in the affected areas,” he said.

The Trump administration did this in 2019, [when it transferred \\$271 million](#) from the Federal Emergency Management Association to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. It also transferred \$23.8 million from the Transportation Security Administration to ICE.

Trump could also reassign law enforcement agencies to tackle immigration enforcement, Bier said, but he would face pushback from affected agencies that have their own priorities.

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ARIANA FIGUEROA

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

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